Perrine AP Language Period 2

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Gender Roles in Mona Lisa Smile

     The film industry greatly impacts gender roles in our society. *Mona Lisa Smile* takes place in the 1950’s. This was an important time for women because of the transition of women working while their husbands were away fighting at war to the husband returning home and woman being expected to give up their independency and being a housewife again. This movie is centered mainly around three girls in their senior year at Wellesley College and their Art History teacher.

     The main character in this film is the teacher, Miss Katherine Watson. For years she had dreamt of working at Wellesley College, an all girls school, because she was very liberal and wanted to teach women who were going to college to esteem to become something other than a housewife. She was looked down upon by the students because she was in her late thirty’s and not married. On her first day of conducting class, the students viewed slides of various paintings.  Katherine was extremely frustrated to find that all of the girls had received the class syllabus prior to class and had already read the entire textbook thus requiring no further thinking.  This experience caused her to change her approach to teaching the girls so that they might learn to have their own minds rather than being fed someone else’s thoughts.  She also required them to develop their own emotions when looking at a painting. Because of this, she had to deal with the school board accusing her of being too liberal in her classroom. This helps the viewer understand more about the transition from housewife to working woman. The woman in the movie were being influenced by society to continue being a stereotypical housewife while also being pulled in the other direction by the new ideals and expectations of the modern woman, whose job was to become independent.

The other main character of this film was Betty Warren. She was a very conservative student whose entire life goal was to getting married and being a proper housewife. Her mother was the president of the alumni at the college and held a seat on almost every board.  This allowed Betty Warren to get away with pretty much anything. She abused her power as editor of the school newspaper and blatantly wrote articles that had extreme consequences to the teachers who crossed her. When she gets married, part way through a semester, she temporarily stops coming to class due to her honeymoon and needing the time to set up their house. When Betty finally returns to class, Katherine Watson finds her conduct unacceptable and in front of the class informs Betty that marriage is an invalid excuse to miss school. At the end of the movie, Betty steps out of her role as typical conservative woman by realizing that being a housewife was not the position she was born to fill. She divorced her husband after discovering that he cheated on her, which was unacceptable at that time. She then decided to use her education and get a job as an independent woman, much like Katherine Watson.

One of the supporting characters, Joan, is a straight A student who dreams of going to law school. When Katherine asks what law school she is thinking of attending, she says Yale but adds that she does not think family expectations will allow her to attend. When Miss Watson asked her what she plans to do after graduation she replies, “Get married.” Joan steps out of her role by applying to Yale. After being accepted, she applies her independence by standing up to Katherine Watson and eloping with her boyfriend. She defends her choice of not going to Yale by stating that she chose marriage, not society. Betty and Joan were depicted by the film industry as stereotypical conservative women. They dressed stylishly, were well mannered, and educated. This character portrays both the independent, and the stereotypical housewife. She acts as a medium between the two types of womanAnother girl named Connie was an average student. She was constantly made fun of because she never had a boyfriend. The film industry depicted her negatively in her role. Because her character had never had a boyfriend, they didn’t make her look as fashionable and attractive as her classmates and as the normal women in advertisements looked. They made her fall in love with a nerdy looking guy and they have her a “geeky” hobby to participate in, playing the cello. She also was less controlled when it came to being well mannered.

The film industry, who was trying to make a point about women in that age also cast certain people for stereotypical roles. One of them was the headmaster. She is written as an extremely conservative women. They casted a very stuffy old women who was extremely mean and strict. Another example is that the school’s nurse who is fired because she hands out birth control to the students even though it is against school rules. They also threaten to remove Miss Watson from her job because she was teaching women to think on their own instead of thinking the way the textbook told them to think. The school however, looks the other way when they discover that one of their male teachers is sleeping with his female students.

In commercials, most voice-overs were done by men and overall, men were featured more often than women. The women who were featured were limited to family roles. Women were shown doing housework and men were the beneficiaries of their work. On the other hand, men were employed, had careers, and were doing something outside the home.  Also, the woman’s marital status is known more often, she is marked by her relationship with men. (Stupor)

One example of how Hollywood depicts female in family roles was when Joan’s fiancé commented that it wouldn’t be logical for Joan to attend law school because it was too long of a commute for her to have dinner on the table by five p.m. Another example is one of the college classes at Wellesley is etiquette. The teacher tells the students that this class is not a joke because when they graduate, their sole responsibly will be to care for their husbands no matter what.

The film industry creates a huge impact of gender roles in society. They do this through casting, advertisements, and the movies themselves. They often set stereotypes and expectations for people of all ages. Although times have changed a lot from the fifties when it comes to women’s independence, there is still a long way to go.

Works Cited

Stupor. Women in Film. 22 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.diigo.com/05ln6>>.

Mona Lisa Smile. 2009. The Internet Movie Database. 22 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0304415/>>.